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ABSTRACT

Although Australia had a vigorous film industry in the silent film era, it was stifled in the 1930s when United States and British interests bought up the Australian distribution channels and closed down the indigenous industry. However, the industry and film study have undergone a renaissance since the advent of the Labor government in 1972, which brought increased funding for the arts and education. Among recent Australian films, several ("Picnic at Hanging Rock," "The Last Wave," and "My Brilliant Career") have become well-known to American audiences. Australian directors such as Peter Weir and Fred Schepsi are also becoming well-known outside of their country. Film study in Australia varies from one film center to another, with each center holding different philosophies and using different approaches--from the strictly semiotic through the broad humanitarian to the strictly professional. Australian film journals range from the small, scholarly "Australian Journal of Film Theory" to the large circulation "Cinema Papers," which combines the attributes of a scholarly journal with those of "Variety." (Author/FL)

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Australian Film Studies

Myles P. Breen

In the last four or five years Australian films have been winning critical acclaim in Europe and North America. There are very few film scholars or critics who have not yet seen or at least read about PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK, THE LAST WAVE or MY BRILLIANT CAREER. In fact, it may seem that the Australian films get more critical acclaim than they deserve. For example, the motorcycle chase, car-smashing MAD MAX was not only a commercial success, but according to Time magazine's reviewer, Richard Corless (July 14, 1980) it exhibited "directorial integrity." He claimed the film was "pure cinema poetry" and after it had played the grind houses, it would "find its way to the film schools and revival houses,where its tough-gutted intelligence may be appreciated."

When Australians speak of the "Renaissance" of their film industry, they are referring to the long-forgotten silent period. Australia had a vigorous film industry from the earliest days in the silent era,[1] and while it survived the depression and the coming of sound, in the 1930's American and British interests bought up the Australian distribution channels and closed down the indigenous industry. Thus for forty five years Australian audiences provided a lucrative market for the American and British product. Because film is an artistic and cultural artifact as well as being a saleable commodity, the Australian audiences became saturated with American culture via the Hollywood film, and no national identity emerged at all on their cinema screens. On occasion, an Australian feature was produced, and American and British companies filmed on location in Australia, but although these films had wide acceptance in Australia, their accumulated cultural effect was negligible. No one spoke of an Australian film industry.

Coincident with the advent of the Labor government's brief tenure from 1972 to 1975, there occurred an unprecedented and massive spurt in funding for the arts and education. The film industry boomed, and so did film studies.

The Films.

In general, the "new wave" of Australian films, in American terminology, are Art films. They play well in Los Angeles and New York, in the art houses in other selected large cities and college towns and then continue on the sixteen millimeter circuit. Peter Weir's three recent films THE CARS THAT ATE PARIS (1974), PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK (1975), and THE LAST WAVE (1977) provide an example of this. CARS was strictly film festival material, but the other two films did well commercially as measured by Variety's Chart of 50 Top Grossing Films. PICNIC is interesting to the film scholar in that it exhibits much of the attributes of the

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traditional narrative film, but does not fulfil the expectations generated by that form. Set in southern Australia at the turn of the century, the plot concerns the fate of genteel schoolgirls who are missing on an outing in the countryside. PICNIC's enigmatic characters, ambiguous themes, apparent lack of climactic progression, preoccupation with psychological overtones and unwillingness to solve its mystery place the film outside the cinematic narrative form. The Australian bush is exotic to Northern Hemisphere eyes, and the photography, which is more evocative of ELVIRA MADIGAN than a suspense thriller, along with the setting, generates expectations in the audience which the storyline counterpoints.

Another Australian director, Fred Schepsi, has tackled difficult and absorbing themes. His THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND (1976) concerns the life of an adolescent novice in a religious order. Truffaut's THE 400 BLOWS comes to mind as a parallel, and the comparison is fitting, at least in the treatment of the subject's psychological anguish. Schepsi's other film, THE CHANT OF JIMMIE BLACKSMITH (1978), is another psychological study. Presuming it is possible to condense the plot of such a film into a single phrase, one might say that it deals with the mistreatment of an aboriginal who tried to live in the white society.

An Australian writer, Sandra Hall, reports that American critics have been generous with goodwill towards the Australian films, but the reviews are tinged with condescension. As an example, she points to a three page rave by Stephen Farber in New West magazine.[2] While Faber said that the Australian continent was "known more for its animal life than its artistic achievement" he claimed the Australian films "set the standard for our own films to match." He goes further: "Unlike many of the acclaimed German films of recent years, these Australian movies are accessible and entertaining as well as searching and innovative. Audiences who are tired of the formula fare from Hollywood studios and the more impenetrable art films from Europe will find a breath of new life in these films from Down Under."

The Schools.

The premier Australian institution for cinema studies in the Australian Film and Television School in Sydney. It is an autonomous body, a College of Advanced Education, and is not affiliated with a university. After a world-wide survey of film and television schools and a nationwide survey of opinions on the school's role, the school was given a strongly professional thrust when it was established in 1972. In its first year it selected twelve students from 600 applicants and today its graduates include accomplished professionals such as Philip Noyce who directed NEWSFRONT and Gillian Armstrong, the director of MY BRILLIANT CAREER. While the A.F.T.S. has within its mandate to hold theory and criticism classes, and to coordinate nationwide curricular offerings with cooperating institutions, so far the predominance of its collective efforts has been towards the training of professionals. For example, while the school pays professional actors to provide the exercises for directors and camerapeople to hone their skills, and the facilities are of the

highest professional quality, the cooperative efforts under the School's Open Program have not borne much fruit to date. Under the Australian system the schools are federally funded and are jealous of their territorial boundaries lest that funding be diminished. The A.F.T.S. is, however, making efforts to expand its Open Program and, as schools go, it is still very young.

Australia must be one of the most urbanized countries on earth. Imagine two cities the size of Chicago or Detroit and three other small cities occupying the space of the continental United States and a rudimentary picture of the country emerges. The two large cities, Sydney and Melbourne, are not at all like Chicago or Detroit, but rather resemble San Francisco and Minneapolis, and are as disparate in character as are those two cities. While Sydney has the Film and Television School, Melbourne's center of film studies is La Trobe University which has a new center of film studies in the Humanities area, but has had several film scholars teaching and publishing for about a decade. Their work ranges from the traditional historical type, through the conventional critical mode to the structuralist and semiotic. The instructors at La Trobe did their graduate work in film at Wisconsin, at Yale, in London, and in Australia and their interests and techniques reflect their varied backgrounds. To illustrate this, reference can be made to the Media Center Papers from La Trobe. Ina Bertrand, a film historian who has a definitive work on film censorship in Australia,[3] has paper number seven on "Efftee Productions" which described the output of a segment of the indigenous industry in the 1930's. Jeff Peck provided an example of conventional criticism with paper number ten: "Comparing Theatre and Film," and Ian Mills used the semiotic approach in his paper number nine: "Elements of Cinematic Sign" With Particular Reference to Chauvinism in Australian Film Products."

While the Film School and La Trobe exemplify the ends of the spectrum of Film Studies--the professional and the scholarly--there are numerous smaller centers which follow either one or the other approach or attempt an amalgam of both approaches. Swinburne College of Technology in Melbourne has provided a "hands on" course in film since 1966. Gillian Armstrong, who directed MY BRILLIANT CAREER graduated from Swinburne in 1971 before she was accepted by the Film School. Swinburne currently offers a three-year diploma in film and television. They accept sixteen students from more than 300 matriculants that apply. Since 1971 Swinburne has also offered a Graduate Diploma which is a one year course, similar to some of the Masters' Degrees offered by American Universities. As well as the intensely practical courses described above, Swinburne also offers courses in theory, criticism and aesthetics in their Media Department.

Another college in Melbourne, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, offers courses in both theory and production in a very similar manner to the American model. The Caufield Institute of Technology, also in Melbourne, integrates film studies into a communications curriculum which included Mass Communications, Persuasion, and Advertising in the same department where instructors express an intense interest in the ideas of Christian Metz and Umberto Eco.

It would be a mistake to equate the Australian College of Advanced Education with an American Community College, as student entrance to the C.A.E.'s is intensely competitive and the students received government financial support to go to school and there is no tuition. Also, because Australia is so isolated, the educational authorities are aware of the "tyranny of distance" and so seem to allow comparatively liberal study leaves for overseas academic improvement.

The national capital of Canberra has a media program in its College of Advanced Education where ethnographic filmmaking is stressed. Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland, has film criticism courses in the Department of Communication at the Queensland Institute of Technology and scattered throughout other institutions in the state. The University of Queensland has no formal film study courses although there is a long tradition of academic interest in film, and various articles and theses will be found from the various departments in the Humanities. Here media studies have just recently been accepted as part of the secondary school curriculum, a break with tradition which most likely will affect the future course of tertiary attitudes to film studies in that state. Also, in Queensland, Griffith University has a program in film studies (which includes the structuralist approach) in a thoroughly academic environment which parallels that of Melbourne's La Trobe University.

The Journals.

In his survey of film periodicals in Australia, Basil Gilbert lists the popular illustrated weeklies, the trade journals, the fan magazines, the film society journals, and the university film journals from 1918 to 1969.[4] One can see an effort in the serious journals to be "of world standing" as measured, more often than not, as being included in one or more of the Film Periodical Indexes. The typically Australian concern of being ignored by the rest of the English-speaking world is coupled by the awareness of being swamped by American mass culture. Gilbert quotes Film Digest in 1965: "Unless prompt action is taken, we may have to resign ourselves to a completely restricted diet of mass-produced American television fodder."

Today the premier film journal is Cinema Papers published in Melbourne. Sold on newsstands throughout the nation, it enjoys the largest circulation of the film magazines, and combines the attributes of Variety and a scholarly journal in a uniquely Australian way. Interviews with filmmakers predominate, although, for example, you might find an interview with Jerzy Toeplitz, the former director of the Film School who is a distinguished film historian and film educator. (Toeplitz was the rector of the State Theatrical and Film Academy in Lodz in Poland from 1948 to 1968). Cinema Papers reports on film festivals, reviews films, gives censorship listings, production reports, film study resource guides, and also surveys oriental films and the international film periodicals. The Sydney version of Cinema Papers is Filmnews which is heavily involved in the politics of filmmaking. For example, it covers film cooperatives, gaining government funding, women's films, and the role of government

agencies in filmmaking in Australia.

Since 1971, the avante-garde and experimental film is covered by Cantrill's Film Notes edited by Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, two Melbourne-based filmmakers and writers.

The journal most like its American scholarly journal counterparts is The Australian Journal of Screen Theory. In fact, until volume five, there was little mention of anything Australian in its contents. Directors covered in articles included Lang, Godard, Brunuel, Pasolini, Bergman, Rohmer and Eisenstein, there were several articles with a structuralist thrust, and the films considered included MEET ME IN SAINT LOUIS and ODE TO BILLY JOE.

The Controversies.

The controversies in the Australian literary and arts scene may seem puzzling, indeed incomprehensible, to visitors. For example, in 1979, when the American film critic Rex Reed and his English counterpart Alexander Walker were brought to the country to observe the film scene, they were to lecture under the Film School auspices. Many of the film teachers encouraged their students to boycott the celebrities' appearance because they were "reviewers" not "critics".

Another component in the melange of controversies in the inevitable competition for funding. If the A.T.F.S. Open Program is to offer a nation-wide course in film studies with cooperating campuses across the country, which institution will count the students as theirs for the all-important federal census? Naturally, within departments and colleges there are also the territorial disputes which are not unknown to academic institutions far from Australia's shores.

The uniquely Australian component which is overlaid on all of the above by disputatious intellectuals, is that Australian culture has been rent by a war between the nationalistic xenophobes and the internationalists for the past forty years.[5] The outcome is nowhere in sight, but the Australian film (and the film studies) which both blossomed under the large scale governmental cultural patronage which began about ten years ago, will undoubtedly play an important part.

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NOTES

[1]Eric Reade, Australian Silent Films (Melbourne, Australia: Lansdowne, 1970)

[2]Sandra Hall, "The Film Industry at the Threshold: Export or Perish," The Bulletin, 8 May, 1979, p. 44.

[3]Ina Bertrand, Film Censorship in Australia (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978).

[4]Basic Gilbert, "Film Periodicals--A Historical Survey. Part 4: Australia 1918-1969," Cinema Papers, October 1978, p. 121; Basil Gilbert, "Film Periodicals--A Historical Survey. Part 5: Australia 1970-1978," Cinema Papers, January 1979, p. 196.

[5]Max Harris, "Australia's 30 Year Cultural War," The Bulletin, 22 May, 1979, p. 55.